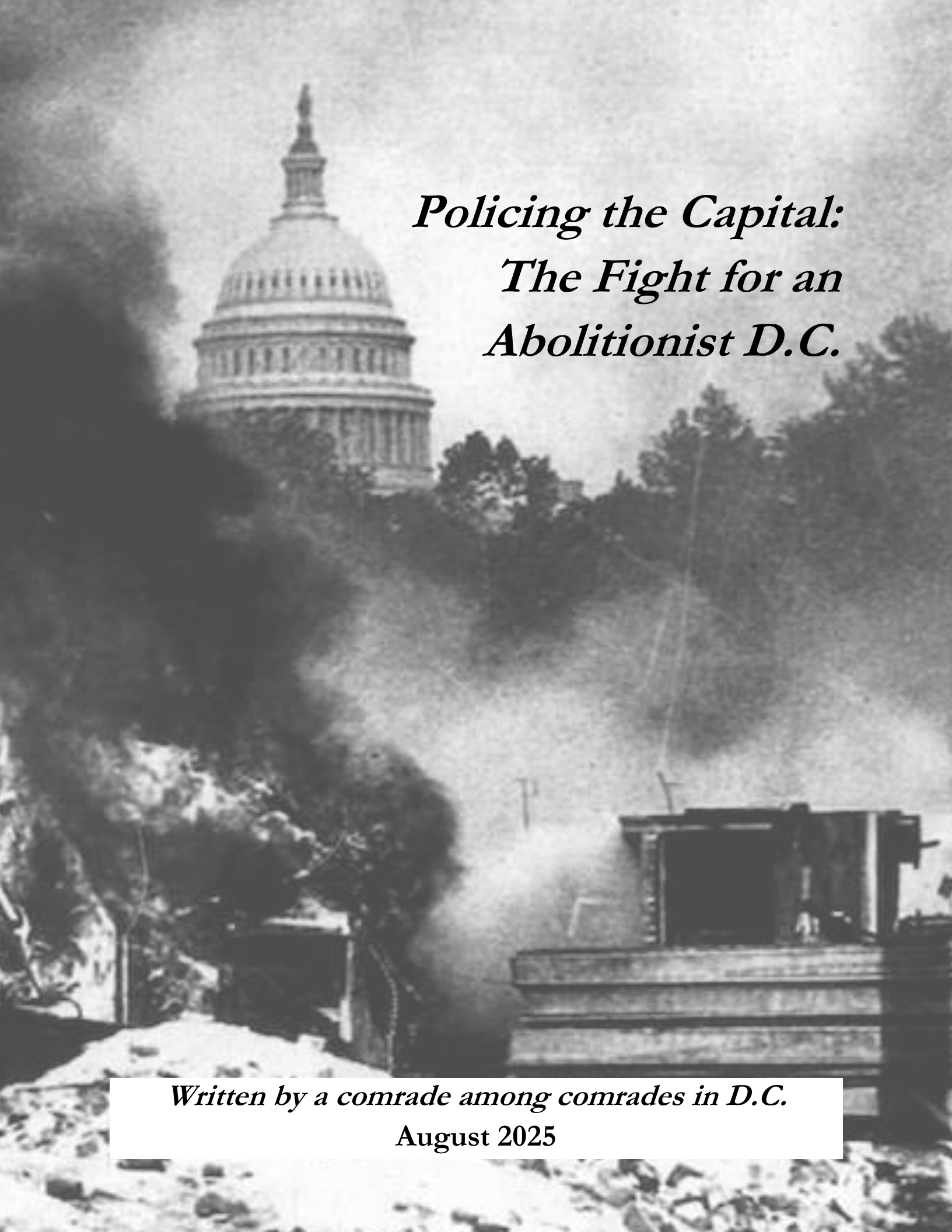

Policing the Capital: The Fight for an Abolitionist D.C.

Written by a comrade among comrades in D.C.

August 2025

"Seems a ball of contradictions, pulling different ways
Between the folks who come and go
And the ones who've got to stay
It's a massive irony for all the world to see
It's the nation's capital, it's Washington, D.C.
…
It's the nation's capital
Got you feeling capital
Punishment is capital in Washington, D.C."

– Gill Scott-Heron, "Washington, D.C." (1982)

"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism."

– Walter Benjamin, "Eighth Thesis on the Philosophy of History" (1940)

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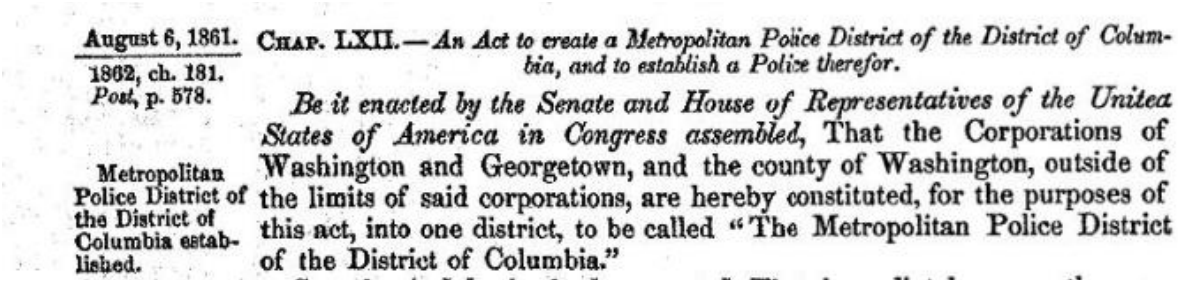
POLICING THE CAPITAL: THE FIGHT FOR AN ABOLITIONIST D.C.

Since United States President Donald Trump announced a "crime emergency" in the nation's capital on August 11, 2025 —invoking Section 740 of the District of Columbia Home Rule Act to temporarily transfer control of the city's police force to the attorney general—many have declared the move an unprecedented federalization of D.C. policing. In a narrow sense, this might be true. Since Congress granted the District limited self-governance with the 1973 Home Rule Act, the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) has been under the control of an elected mayor and city council. But a deeper analysis of the role of policing in the history of the U.S. capital city reveals Trump's recent "takeover of D.C." to be another chapter in the long history of governing D.C. through police violence.

For those of us committed to defending our communities in D.C. from this latest fascist attack, reckoning with the history of the MPD as the foundations of District governance not only clarifies the limitations of appealing to municipal and federal authorities to save us, but should inspire us to recommit ourselves to a longer abolitionist tradition of building a police-free world from inside the belly of American empire.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MPD AS A FEDERAL POLICE FORCE

When Congress established the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia in 1861, there was no such thing as a D.C. government. Back then, the District was governed by the distinct municipalities of Georgetown and Washington City. It was not until after the Civil War that the entire District of Columbia would become one unified jurisdiction. And it was precisely the 1861 establishment of the MPD that marked the first step toward this modern form of D.C. government.



August 6, 1861.
1862, ch. 181.
Post, p. 578.

CHAP. LXII.—*An Act to create a Metropolitan Police District of the District of Columbia, and to establish a Police therefor.*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Corporations of Washington and Georgetown, and the county of Washington, outside of the limits of said corporations, are hereby constituted, for the purposes of this act, into one district, to be called "The Metropolitan Police District of the District of Columbia."

Metropolitan Police District of the District of Columbia established.

Indeed, the very title of the MPD establishment law (above) signals this new formation of D.C. governance: "An Act to Create a Metropolitan Police District of the District of Columbia, and to Establish a Police Therefor." The birth of the MPD in 1861 was not simply the construction of a police department, but first and foremost the creation of a new "Metropolitan Police District of the District of Columbia" that consolidated the territories of Georgetown, Washington City, and the rest of Washington County into a single jurisdiction for the MPD to patrol. A decade before the 1871 Organic Act that instituted a single government for the District of Columbia, the 1861 establishment of the Metropolitan Police Department represented the inauguration of modern D.C. governance.

Since then, the MPD has continued to serve as a proving ground for the very structure of D.C. government. The initial authority over D.C. policing belonged to a Board of Police Commissioners—appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate—which submitted annual reports and budget requests directly to Congress, first through the secretary of the Interior and later, after the establishment of the Department of Justice in 1870, through the attorney general as head of the DOJ. In other words, the MPD began its career precisely as a federal police force, including oversight from the attorney general. When Trump decided to transfer control of the MPD to Attorney General Pam Bondi, this was not the first time that the attorney general had exercised oversight over the D.C. police. Moreover, the original structure of the MPD under a board of commissioners ultimately inspired Congress to expand federal control over the entire District in 1874 through a Board of Commissioners that would rule D.C. for the next century. In this way, the status of D.C. as a federally controlled city begins and ends with the police.

"the MPD began its career precisely as a federal police force … the status of D.C. as a federally controlled city begins and ends with the police"

POLICING THE CITY BEYOND THE MONUMENTS

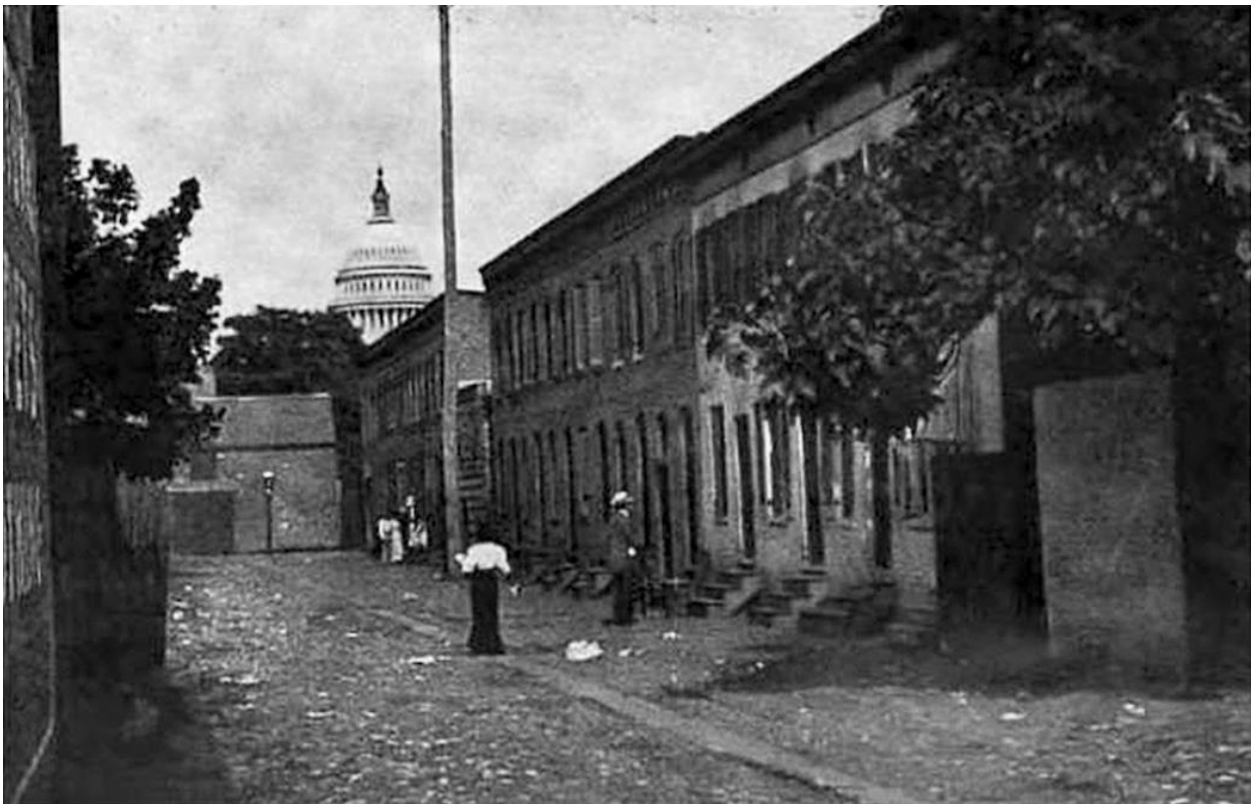
Far from a historical anomaly, then, President Trump's re-federalization of the MPD under the Home Rule Act not only signals a desire to return the department to its original form, but also renews the time-honored function of local policing as the violent foundations for remaking D.C. into a model and symbol of American governance. Since the Civil War, countless presidential administrations, congresses, and federal officials have sought to use their unique powers over the capital city to make an example out of D.C. And regardless of the particular political aims of those in charge, every attempt to make D.C. a model of American governance has been underwritten by MPD police violence against the most marginalized District residents.

"every attempt to make D.C. a model of American governance has been underwritten by MPD police violence against the most marginalized District residents"

During that initial period of the Civil War and Reconstruction, D.C. emerged as an "example for all the land," in the words of the Radical Republican leader Charles Sumner, with the first federal acts on emancipation, manhood suffrage, civil rights law, and universal public education. On the ground, however, the MPD was cracking down against anyone perceived as socially deviant, especially the large population of Black migrants who escaped slavery in Virginia and Maryland and made their homes in downtown alley communities. In order to make D.C. a laboratory for a post-slavery United States, the MPD criminalized non-normative family units as "disorderly households"; used vagrancy laws to commit those without formal employment, including old men, sex workers, and children, to labor in workhouses; and raided bars, dancehalls, and public gatherings to enforce acceptable racial, gendered, and sexual behaviors. When Trump declares war on immigrants, the unhoused, and Black youth to make D.C. a model for the country, we have to understand this as a war that the MPD has been training for since its founding.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the next generation of Washington leaders set their sights on making D.C. both a model and a national symbol during the Progressive Era.

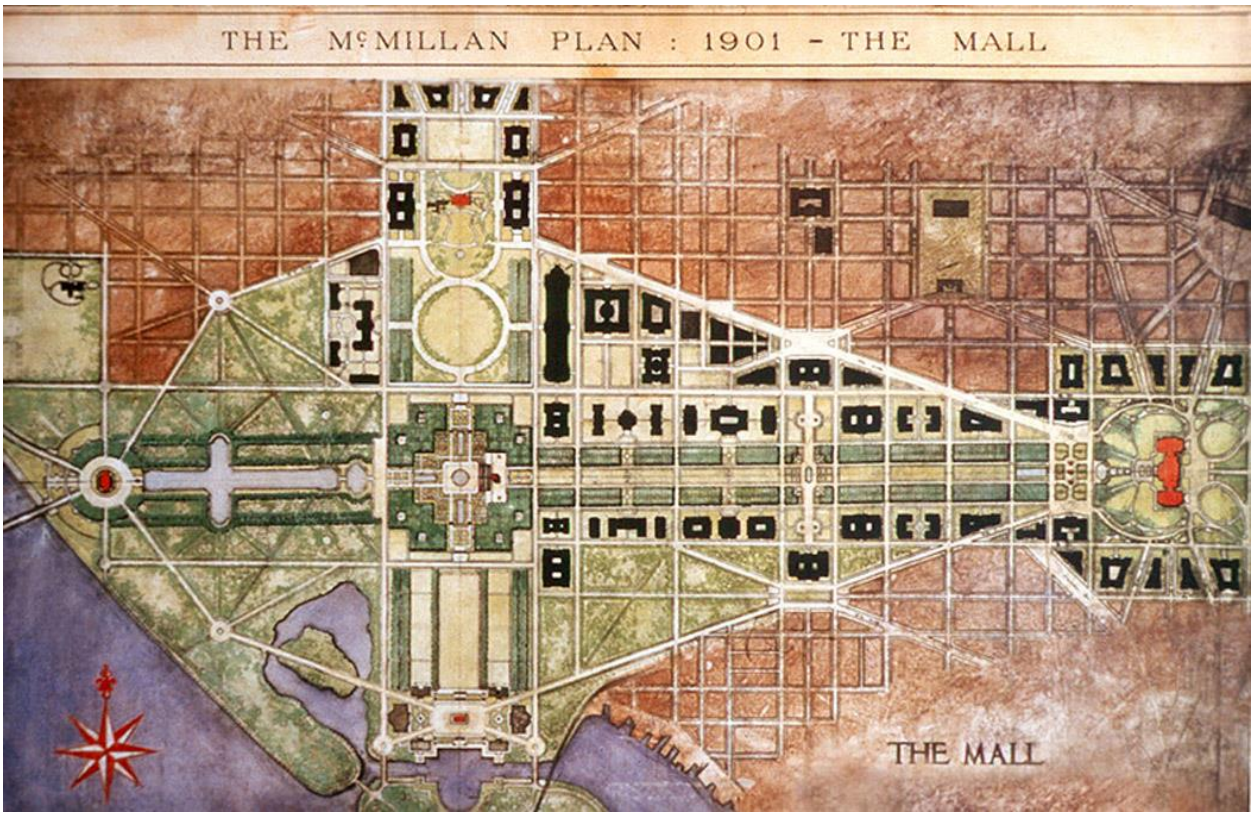
As elite white social reformers aimed to solve the adverse conditions of urban life like poor sanitation, infectious diseases, overcrowded housing, and child labor, architects and engineers were simultaneously reimagining city planning for a rapidly globalizing world. When these two leading Progressive Era movements came to Washington, they found a common ally in the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department and its long-time war on Black alley communities (below).



After the Civil War, many of those same alley neighborhoods that had welcomed newly arrived Black migrants fleeing slavery remained vibrant communities of support and resistance against the dominant order of white supremacy and racial capitalism. Despite decades of raids by the MPD, Black alley communities in D.C. developed a reputation for successfully resisting police control over their neighborhoods. In response, prominent social reformers, armed with the paternalistic belief that they were saving alley residents from themselves without offering meaningful housing replacements, teamed up with MPD leaders to support federal legislation that would further criminalize and ultimately eliminate the vast majority of inhabited alleys across the District. While those insurgent alley communities of the past have been destroyed, the Trump administration's current attacks on local immigrant neighborhoods, homeless

encampments, and Black youth subcultures aim to prevent the (re)emergence of abolitionist communities of care in D.C.

At the same time, the country's leading architects and engineers dreamed up plans to update the original L'Enfant design of downtown Washington as a national and international symbol of American strength. On the heels of the Spanish-American War that founded a U.S. empire in the Pacific and Caribbean, the 1902 Senate Park Commission's McMillan Plan re-envisioned D.C. as an eternal "White City" that would house the growing imperial administration alongside the National Mall in what is today Federal Triangle and Federal Center (below).



But standing in the way, quite literally, of the McMillan Plan, were those same Black alley neighborhoods along Pennsylvania Avenue and below the Mall in Southwest. In the process of remaking downtown Washington into the symbolic and administrative headquarters of American global power, the McMillan Plan relied on the MPD to pave the way, including the condemnation and destruction of hundreds of alley residences by the MPD over the next few decades. If the D.C. of today appears as "the city beyond the monuments," as the popular saying goes, it is a testament to the incredible amounts

of local police violence undertaken to build the modern infrastructure of the U.S. federal government. When Trump says that he wants to make D.C. "Safe and Beautiful," we should understand this as the latest attempt to use local police violence to whitewash the image of American empire.

THE CARCERAL COSTS OF D.C. HOME RULE

Even when the District of Columbia finally achieved the current home rule system of local government that now appears under attack by the Trump administration, D.C. self-governance was accompanied by a carceral crackdown on District residents. In response to the freedom struggles of Black Power, gay liberation, and the movement against the U.S. war in Vietnam that were taking root around the country and especially in D.C., liberal and conservative politicians alike designed home rule for D.C. as a way to pacify the residents of the capital while still maintaining federal control and influence.

Like each evolution of D.C. governance before it, home rule was accomplished through further investment and entrenchment in the violence of local policing and incarceration. During the velvet glove administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, D.C. was given a non-elected mayor and city council in coordination with dramatic increases in spending, weapons technology, and surveillance capabilities for the MPD. And by the time President Richard Nixon signed the long-awaited Home Rule Act in December 1973, his iron fist administration had already instituted another omnibus D.C. crime bill in 1970 that not only authorized the MPD to conduct no-knock raids and extensive wiretapping operations but also overhauled the District court system to lock up more D.C. residents for longer, including children. The cost of today's limited self-government for D.C. was paid for with a dramatic expansion in the violence of policing and incarceration.

"The cost of today's limited self-government for D.C. was paid for with a dramatic expansion in the violence of policing and incarceration"

THE LATEST CHAPTER OF D.C. POLICE VIOLENCE

With all this in mind, it is worth reckoning with Trump's federalization of the MPD as a perfectly legal application of the 1973 Home Rule Act. What does it say about the nature of D.C. governance that the Trump administration's use of the District as a laboratory for national attacks on immigrants, the unhoused, children of color, and protestors is entirely consistent with both the laws and the history of D.C. as the nation's capital?

Some of the more illuminating responses to Trump's announcement have come from the city's local authorities. Under the national spotlight, Mayor Muriel Bowser, Council Chairman Phil Mendelson, and MPD Chief Pamela Smith each initially reacted to the news with astonishment and confusion before clarifying that they were perfectly willing to work with the federal government to continue the priorities of D.C. policing. After all, underneath the fascist rhetoric of the president, it is unclear how Trump's new mission will differ qualitatively from the recent efforts of the D.C. government under home rule.

For years, the MPD has coordinated with U.S. Park Police to conduct periodic sweeps of homeless encampments across the city, offering empty promises of housing and social services while destroying the possessions of already vulnerable residents, a vast majority of whom are Black. Similarly, Mayor Bowser and the D.C. Council have collaborated on several crime bills since 2020 to roll back reform efforts and further criminalize District residents. Most recently, the MPD has been given emergency powers to enforce a youth curfew throughout the District this summer, as well as the discretion to create "extended juvenile curfew zones," which have been used overwhelmingly to target the public behaviors of Black youth in high-tourist areas. And when it comes to the repression of dissent, the D.C. police have repeatedly shown that they are more than capable of wielding enormous amounts of violence against those they see as a threat to property and public order, including kettling, mass arrests, and the indiscriminate use of tear gas. If anything, then, the threat

> ***"the threat of Trump's 'takeover of D.C.' is a threat to accelerate and generalize the violence of local policing with more resources, more weapons, and more legal power"***

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THE LIMITATIONS OF D.C. STATEHOOD

In the wake of Trump's declaration of a "crime emergency" in D.C., it may be tempting to raise the banner, once again, of District statehood. Certainly, the specific method of attack from the Trump administration would have been much more difficult, legally speaking, had the District of Columbia been a full-fledged state with proportional representation in Congress and full control over its own budget and police force. And yet, as I hope this overview of the MPD as the historical foundations of D.C. governance has made clear, any and all formations of District governance—whether under federal rule, home rule, or even statehood—will necessarily rely on and perpetuate the racial, gendered, and class-based violence of the D.C. police.

Take for instance, the popular reform of "sanctuary city" laws that Trump has threatened across the country. In its current formulation, a "sanctuary city" is defined precisely through the discretion of the local police to not cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. Already in D.C., where the local Sanctuary Values Amendment Act of 2020 still remains the law, the MPD announced on August 14 that it would allow officers to share information about people's immigration status with ICE. And since MPD and ICE officers have instituted joint patrols, we have already seen instances in which a police stop turns into immigration detention.

If we are serious about creating a real sanctuary city capable of defending and supporting our immigrant neighbors, our unhoused neighbors, our criminalized neighbors, and indeed, every last one of us, we can no longer appeal to any government in D.C. that is founded upon the violence of the police, whether under federal or local control.

THE FIGHT FOR AN ABOLITIONIST D.C.

True to that same long history of those District residents who built and sustained communities beyond the monuments and always against the MPD, we are already seeing growing popular refusals of Trump's attack that don't rely on the D.C. police to keep us safe. On the night of August 13, after a joint force of officers from the MPD and ICE set up a checkpoint on 14th Street NW in the U Street neighborhood, hundreds of residents amassed spontaneously on the sidewalks to chant down local and federal police alike while proactively redirecting drivers to avoid the checkpoint. And after reports on August 14 of an impending District-wide sweep on homeless encampments, countless autonomous affinity groups responded with emergency mutual aid distributions to help unhoused people evade possible arrest and forced displacement.

From these earliest moments of resistance, a possible way forward appears: ***generalizing the struggle for a police-free world***. It will not be enough to return control of the MPD to the same local authorities who continue to criminalize and punish our most marginalized residents. It will not be enough to confine our outrage to the latest invasion of federal law enforcement agencies and National Guard troops when it is the MPD that facilitates and reinforces their mission. It will still not be enough when there is another resident in the White House or the Wilson Building. And it will never be enough to put the safety of our neighbors, our communities, and ourselves in the hands of any authority, government, or state founded upon the violence of policing.

Against the violence of federal agents and local police officers alike; the administrations of Trump and Bowser; and every distinction of legal and illegal, documented and undocumented, guilty or innocent; we oppose their past and present of policing with an abolitionist future of mutual aid and community defense.

7TH STREET NW